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SHANGHAI IN THE SPRING TIME: A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE SHANGHAI ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER IMPROVEMENT PLAN (SETIP)

Rose Woodford (with Nely Wang)

As trainers, how often do we have the opportunity to taste the fruits of our endeavours? As someone who plans, delivers and manages professional development courses for teachers in the Short Course Unit of the Centre for English Language Teacher Education (CELTE) at the University of Warwick, I have worked with hundreds of teachers from many parts of the globe. We work very intensively together for the few weeks they are with us and then that creative energy is dispersed into their own work on their return. But for the occasional email, I rarely have an insight into the real impact of the training course we have experienced together. The Shanghai English Teacher Improvement Project (SETIP) is different.

Over the past five years we have received five groups of fifteen experienced teachers of English who are starting their journeys as teacher trainers. They have the chance to attend the eleven-week course at CELTE thanks to the support of the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission (SMEdC), the Shanghai Teacher Training Centre (STTC) and the British Council in Shanghai. At the time of writing, we are now in the “autumn” of the first phase of the project, discussing the opportunities for continued collaboration. There has been a lot of evidence to suggest that this experience has had a real impact on the professional development of the Shanghai trainers and that this is likely to continue. I am grateful to Nely Wang, a participant in the second course at Warwick, whose reflections allow me to illustrate this process.

The journey from Shanghai is a long one, in many ways. The new trainers are encouraged to step out way beyond their comfort zone in almost all aspects of their lives during their time in UK. These include living with a host family and studying in a very interactive and participant-centred mode. Taking on the role of “Trainer” is often an unfamiliar one, and, in some cases, an unwelcome responsibility. Nely reflected:

“Little did I think about the word “trainer”, let alone how to become a good one... work[ing] with groups of peer colleagues can be

intimidating and frustrating, especially under the context back home, where teachers tend to be critical and judgmental”.

From this difficult starting point, many of the SETIP trainers have taken giant steps into the world of Teacher Trainer since returning home. They have been greatly supported by SMEdC and STTC encouraged to contribute to the improvement of English teaching in many different capacities. After every eleven-week course at CELTE, the British Council in Shanghai have invited me on a project monitoring visit the following spring to witness first-hand the contribution of the Warwick returnees to the SETIP project. The first monitoring trip was my first visit to Shanghai for twelve years. Arriving downtown in Shanghai in the evening, one is struck by the impressive display of colourful neon lights, scaffolding, cranes and the relentless 24-hour construction and development activities. Some of the facades downtown may be temporary, but there is serious and long-term construction and development going on in schools and teacher training colleges across Shanghai. The SETIP returnees are playing an important role in building firm foundations for effective teacher development. It has always been a great privilege to participate in the monitoring visit and has represented a very valuable opportunity for us all to “make sense” of the course at CELTE.

I have been able to monitor in the following ways:

- observe training sessions run by Warwick returnees;
- see supervisors in action (observing teachers and leading feedback discussions with teachers);
- meet Action Research groups and take part in their discussions;
- motivate and explore possibilities for returnees who have had fewer opportunities to contribute to SETIP.

One of the main benefits of the spring-time monitoring visits has been that they give the Warwick returnees the chance to get together. Sometimes these are formally arranged meetings by STTC, sometimes they are ad hoc gatherings over dinner arranged by the returnees themselves. The very fact that these teams are able to reunite in Shanghai is a valuable chance to promote the work of the project, as it facilitates the following:

- sharing of memories of the experience in UK;
- catching up personally and professionally;
- networking, liaising and planning future collaborations between returnees;
- collecting and collating materials for publication and use by local teachers;
- reigniting enthusiasm for SETIP for those returnees who may have “disappeared” since their return.

They may not be made of neon, but nonetheless, there are lights going on all over Shanghai for English teachers. The vibrant energy of the SETIP returnees is a powerful illuminating force. I have observed a training session run by Nely with her district colleagues and an appreciation of the journey she has made moved me deeply. She commented:

“If only I could influence my students in the same way my trainers did to me, I couldn’t help thinking to myself. For the first time in my teaching career I began to see how powerful the affective factors like empathy, encouragement, confidence... are.”

The journey leading to her finding her identity as a trainer had not been an easy one, but she was part of a strong training team in Shanghai. She reflected on the progress of the programme they was running:

“Activities and materials were carefully chosen and tailor-made. Though there were times of silence and reluctance, we stuck to our original principle – being positive, encouraging and having faith. After several workshops we began to taste the sweet fruits of our work.”

The teachers in the session I observed (the third in the series) were lively, active and thoroughly engaged with the topic. They were enjoying communicating with each other in a professional way and sharing ideas and experience in a supportive and motivating atmosphere that had been created by the trainers.

Having travelled several thousand miles in my body over the last five years, I have the opportunity to reflect on my own mental learning journey. Meeting SETIP returnees in Shanghai enables me to ask them to reflect on how far they have come and see evidence of this with my own eyes and feel the effects in my own heart. It gives me the chance to appreciate which aspects of the work we do together have made a real difference for them in the development of their role as a Trainer. After each visit, I have been able to implement subtle, and sometimes radical, changes into the next course in order to try and make it more relevant for the next group of SETIP trainers. Through my journeys to Shanghai I have gained an increasing appreciation for the context in which the returnees work, as teachers and as trainers.

I am pleased to report that, at the time of writing, a SETIP conference is being planned in Shanghai for the spring-time. All the SETIP UK returnees will be invited to attend and many may also be involved in sharing their experience and practice through running workshops and input sessions for the other delegates. The course at Warwick has developed considerably since the first trainers came in 2002. More recent returnees have much to share with the pioneers of the early days, and vice versa. It is exciting to know that the motivation and stimulation of ideas continues five years on. There are increasing opportunities for the returnees to find appropriate fora for developing their training skills, and many find themselves promoted into positions which really give them the opportunity to manage teacher-training in a meaningful way.

Perhaps the final words should go to Nely herself:

“I am lucky so many opportunities arose for me to hone my skills as a trainer after my return”